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Service Quality, Customers' Satisfaction and the Moderating Effects of Gender: A Study of Arabic Restaurants

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Abstract

In the highly competitive business environment, customers' evaluation of service quality is critical for service firms' survival. While there are numerous studies on service quality, very few have investigated the moderating effect of gender on the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction in Arabic restaurants. Therefore, this study aims to provide additional insight into the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction by examining the moderating effect of customers' gender in Arabic restaurants and to identify the extent of each service quality attributes in relation with customer satisfaction as they are perceived by Malaysian customers. A quantitative study was conducted and a set of questionnaire examining the attributes of service quality and customer satisfaction was developed. The data was collected through the survey completed by 411 respondents. Correlation analysis and hierarchical regressions were employed to analyse the data. The correlation analysis shows that all the five service quality attributes – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy have positive relationship with customer satisfaction. However, hierarchical regressions indicated a slightly different result. The attributes-tangibles, assurance and empathy are found to have significant relationship with customer satisfaction, but the relationship with the other two attributes – reliability and responsiveness is insignificant. Empathy has a strong positive correlation with customers' satisfaction while responsiveness has a weak positive relation with customers' satisfaction. These findings indicate that restaurant operators should improve their service quality, especially in terms of their responsiveness in order to enhance customers' satisfaction. In addition, gender plays a significant effect in the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Customer's assessment of service quality is a critical information for service providers whose aim is to improve business performance, strengthen core competencies and position themselves more strategically in the market place (Cronin & Taylor 1992, Jain & Gupta 2004). Organizations that provide superior service quality do experience higher economic returns and also have a more satisfied customer base (Aaker & Jacobson, 1994; Gilbert et al., 2004; Gilbert & Veloutsou, 2006). Therefore, it has become ubiquitous for service providers to seek out competitive advantages by providing superior service (Lee et al., 2004). According to Zeithaml (1988) service quality is usually defined as the customer's judgement of the overall excellence or superiority of the service. Powers and Barrows (2003) suggested that service is particularly a pivotal or fundamental element in the restaurant sector. In order to measure service quality, Zeithaml and Berry (1998) have developed an instrument called SERVQUAL which consists of five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles. While Nikolich and Sparks (1995) have stated that perceived levels of service in restaurants are based on the relationship between customers and service providers. Customer satisfaction is viewed as influencing repurchase intentions and behavior, which, in turn, leads to an organization's future revenue and profits. As a result of its direct link with profits, the issues of service quality and customer satisfaction have become a focus to all organization including restaurant industries. More and more companies are compelled to assess and improve their service quality in an effort to attract customers (Gilbert & Veloutsou, 2006). Customer satisfaction can be defined as a customer's overall evaluation of his or her purchase and consumption experience of goods or services (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Johnson et al., 1995).

Interests in Arabic restaurants seem to be continuously increasing in Malaysia due to the increasing number of tourists' arrival from the Middle East in the past several years. Arabic tourists visit Malaysia frequently, especially during their summer season after the 11th September 2001 tragedy in America (Salleh, Redzuan, Abu, Mohd & Mohd, 2010). The September 11 tragedy had greatly changed the global tourism scenario especially in Malaysia and tourists especially from the Muslim countries were becoming more careful and selective in choosing their holiday destinations (Salleh et al., 2010). In year 2000 about 249,260 Middle East tourists visited the United States but in 2002 and 2005 the numbers had decreased tremendously to 126,613 and 144,131 respectively (Salleh et al., 2010). Similarly, tourists arrivals in the United Kingdom also declined from 429,000 to 360,000 and 380,000 (Salleh et al., 2010).

According to Salleh et al. (2010), tourists from the Middle East started to find alternative holiday destinations. One of their choices for a holiday is Malaysia because it is an Islamic country. As such, their arrivals to Malaysia have shown an increasing trend. For instance, in 2010, Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of the Immigration Department stated that tourist from the Middle East visiting Malaysia increase every year and the number of visitors from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Iran totalled 86,771, 25,645 and 116,252 respectively. In 2011, their numbers and percentage increased to 15.6% from these three countries; Saudi Arabia-87,693, UAE- 24,212 and Iran-139,617 (Tourism Malaysia, 2012). The increasing number of tourist arrivals from the Middle East and the increasing number of Arabic restaurants in Malaysia has made Arabic food much popular and well accepted by the Malaysian citizens. Although there are numerous studies about Arab tourists and their behaviour, studies focusing on Arabic restaurants and the role of gender as a moderator is still limited. Hence, this study is very important to identify the factors that satisfy customers and how gender moderates the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in Arabic restaurants. A few studies have addressed the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in fast-food restaurants (Brady et al., 2001; Gilbert et al., 2004; Kara et al., 1995; Lee & Ulgado, 1997; Qin & Prybutok, 2008). However, none of the studies are related to Arabic restaurants. Thus, the purpose of this study is (1) to examine the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction in Arabic restaurants, (2) to identify which attribute influences customer satisfaction the most in Arabic restaurants and (3) to examine the moderating effect of gender between service quality and customer satisfaction in Arabic restaurants.

2. Literature review

2.1. Customer satisfaction

Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) define satisfaction as a judgement that a product or service feature (or the product or service itself) provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment. Choi and Chu (2001) consider satisfaction as an evaluation by customers that the food or service they have received is at least as good as it is

supposed to be. Customer satisfaction is critically significant as it reflects subjective customer evaluations of the attribute performance associated with the consumption experience (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). As for customer's outcome behaviors, loyalty can be measured using positive word of mouth, revisit intention and willingness to recommend, which were taken from Mattila (2001) and Evanschitzky et al. (2006). According to Zeithaml (1988), perceived value plays an important role in the consumer purchase decision making, suggesting that behavioral intentions are consequences of perceived value. When customers perceive high levels of value from consumption experiences, they tend to express positive behavioral intentions. Customers who have previous experiences that they perceive as highly valuable in terms of efficient and economical aspects will be more likely to have revisit intentions (Swinyard, 1993). In the service industry, word-of-mouth is one of the most powerful forms of communication. This is because they seek information and during the information-seeking process, customers often see word-of-mouth information as more reliable as the third-party's opinion is based on their experiences. Previous research by Swan & Oliver (1989), has suggested that word-of-mouth is a consequence of the customers' emotional responses to consumption experiences. The more customers value the affective aspects of a dining experience, the more likely they will be to have the intention to spread positive word-of-mouth. Willingness to recommend is also a positive behavioral intention derived from the perceived value of consumption experiences (Bowen & Shoemaker, 2003; Ladhari et al., 2008). It is also found that customers who perceive their experiences in terms of value, either hardness or utilitarian, tend to express their opinion by recommending the same experience to others. In a restaurant setting, when customers perceive the value of the dining experience highly in terms of cognitive aspects and affective, they are more likely to recommend the restaurant to others.

2.2. *Service quality*

The term service has been defined differently in service quality literature. For instance, Du Plessis and Rousseau (2003) define services as "those separately identifiable, essentially intangible activities which provide want-satisfaction and which are not necessarily tied to the sale of a product or another service". Payne-Palacio and Theis (2001) define services as "the intangible (untouchable or inconsumable) aspect of the dining out experience". Powers and Barrows (2003) suggested that service is particularly a pivotal or fundamental element in the restaurant sector, bearing in mind that dining in restaurants is predominantly a social event. Elliott and Meng (2008) stated that customers of luxury restaurants expect excellent service through courteous and knowledgeable employees. Kivela et al. (1999, 2000 & 2009) stated that in the restaurant industry, customers not only evaluate the quality of food but also the quality of service they encounter during their dining experience. Perceived quality of service is another core determinant of customer satisfaction and behavioral intention. Kivela et al. (1999, 2000) also proposed that a comprehensive model for dining satisfaction and return patronage in their study indicated that the probability of return patronage was dependent on customers' satisfaction with five aspects of a restaurant namely; first and last impressions, service quality, food quality, ambience quality and feeling comfortable eating there, and reservations and parking. Ladhari et al. (2008) investigated determinants of dining satisfaction and post-dining behavioral intentions, and concluded that perceived service quality influenced customer satisfaction through both positive and negative emotions. In some studies, it was found that service quality was more important than food quality in dining satisfaction. A study conducted by Yuksel and Yusel (2002) suggested that service quality had significant effect on dining satisfaction at an aggregate market level, and particularly for adventurous or healthy food seekers. Andaleeb and Conway (2006) examined the factors that explained customer satisfaction in the full-service restaurant segment and show their results suggested that compared with food quality/reliability, physical design and price, service responsiveness was the most important contributor to customer satisfaction.

2.3. *Attributes of service quality*

The instrument that is most often used for measuring perceived quality of service in the marketing literature is from SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988). It consists of five service dimensions which are tangibles (physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel), reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and provide prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence) and empathy (caring, individualized attention the firm provides its customers). According to Lee and Johnson (1997) and Zeithaml and Bitner (2003)

tangibles pertain to the appearance of the establishment's physical facilities, equipment, and personnel. Thus, tangibles are used by restaurants to communicate their image and signal quality to customers. The aforesaid authors concur that services are intangible not only because customers cannot see, feel, smell, hear or taste, but it is also because they are difficult to conceptualize. The intangibility aspect makes services difficult to illustrate, describe and communicate (Kasapila, 2006). As a result, what a restaurant intends to deliver might be quite different from what the patrons receive (Lee & Hing, 1995). In addition, the intangibility of services makes it difficult for customers to evaluate or understand the exact nature of services offered (Zikmund & D'Amico, 2002). Despite the intangibility of services, customers or guests are very much aware of its presence or absence (Payne-Palacio & Theis, 2001). For example, customers are quick to notice when there is a lack of friendliness or indifference on the part of the waiter or waitress (Payne-Palacio & Theis, 2001).

Reliability refers to the ability of an establishment to offer service dependably and accurately. In its broadest sense, reliability means that an organization delivers on its promises – promises about service provision, pricing, delivery and problem solving (Jordaan & Prinsloo, 2001; Lee & Johnson, 1997; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). In restaurants, reliability may be characterized by adherence to customer requests regarding the preparation of menu items, reservations of tables and accurate billing among others. *Responsiveness* refers to the willingness of service providers to provide prompt service and help customers. This dimension emphasizes attentiveness and promptness in dealing with customer questions, requests, problems and complaints (Lee & Johnson, 1997; Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Responsiveness is communicated to customers by the length of time they have to wait for assistance, answers to questions, or attention to problems. That is to say that service quality may be enhanced through responsiveness if, for example, patrons are timely assisted with the wine list and menu, or if staff responds appropriately to a customer's request for prompt service (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003).

Assurance relates to the knowledge and courtesy of employees and also their ability to convey confidence and trust. This dimension becomes important when patrons feel uncertain about service offerings of a particular restaurant (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Assurance may be ensured if, for example, patrons are able to trust the recommendations made by the waiter, feel confident that the food is free from contamination and voice any concern without fear of insult or recrimination. *Empathy* is the caring and individualized attention an establishment provides to its customers like treating customers as individuals. The essence of empathy is by conveying, through personalized service, that customers are special and unique (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). Customers want to feel important and understood by the organizations that provide services to them. Employees in restaurants may show empathy to customers by greeting them by name, knowing their dietary requirements / preferences, and being understanding / sympathetic towards their problems (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003).

2.4. Moderating variable

Moderating variables are independent variables that affect the direction and/or the strength of the relationship between independent and dependent variables (Thompson, 2006). Tat, Balasubramaniam, Chin, Rasli and Jusoh (2011) stated that demographic variables, such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status are known as customer characteristic. Individual customer differences such as gender, age and income are significant determinants of the customer satisfaction (Bryant & Cha 1996; Johnson & Fornell 1991; Soderlund 2002). Tat et al. (2011) mentioned that gender refers to a set of characteristics differentiating between males and females. Empirical studies conducted by Jaffe (1991) and Jaffe and Berger (1988) found that gender identity plays a significant role. Drawing on social role theory (Archer 1996; Eagly 1987), men are more willing than women to take risks (Powell & Ansic 1997; Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004) because socially men are expected to engage in risky behaviour. Because it is riskier to switch providers and try something new, if men follow internalised gender roles, they may be less likely to remain loyal when their satisfaction levels change. Conversely, women are expected to react differently to satisfaction level changes (Garbarino & Strahilevitz 2004).

2.5. Research hypotheses

Based on the literature above, the researcher has identified five independent variables namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy and one moderating variable which is gender. The dependent variable is customer satisfaction. From the framework, six hypotheses were formulated:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between tangibles and customers' satisfaction.
- H2: There is a positive relationship between reliability and customers' satisfaction.
- H3: There is a positive relationship between responsiveness and customers' satisfaction.
- H4: There is a positive relationship between assurance and customers' satisfaction.
- H5: There is a positive relationship between empathy and customers' satisfaction.
- H6: Gender will significantly moderate the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and questionnaire design

The population of this research comprised of individuals who patronized and received services from the Arabic restaurants in Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia. The respondents consisted of government servants, private sectors employees, self-employed and students who came to dine in at the restaurant. For the year 2012, Shah Alam in Selangor has a total of 646 890 residents (Shah Alam City Council, MBSA). According to Sekaran (2004), if population (N) is 75,000, the sample will be 382 respondents and if the population (N) is 1,000,000, the sample will be 384 respondents. Roscoe (1975) stated that sample sizes should be larger than 30 and less than 500 appropriate for most research. The questionnaires were sent to 600 respondents and out of the total, 411 responses were received, giving a response rate of 68.5 per cent and deemed as appropriate. The SERVQUAL model was used to measure the relationship between service quality and customers' satisfaction. The instrument design is based on five dimensions of service quality and three dimensions of customer satisfaction. This was adopted from a previous research done (Kasapila, 2006; Namkung & Jang, 2008; Kim, Han, & Ryu, 2008; Jang & Liu, 2009; & Jang & Ha, 2010). In order to make it suitable with the study, some modification was made to the questionnaire. It was divided into three parts; Part A contained demographic profile with 7 items such as gender, age, marital status, level of education, occupation, income and dine-in frequency at the restaurant. Part B contained questions about service quality based on five dimensions; tangibles (8 items), reliability (8 items), responsiveness (7 items), assurance (7 items) and empathy (5 items). Part C was on questions about customer satisfaction that comprises of 6 items. A five-point Likert scale was employed to measure the service quality and customer satisfaction ranging from '1-strongly disagree' to '5-strongly agree'. This is supported by DeVellis (1991) who also used a five-point Likert scale for measuring the service quality and customer satisfaction.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Convenience sampling was used to collect the data from the Arabic restaurant's customers and it took about three months to complete. The customers must fulfil certain requirements before answering the questions. First, the respondents must have the experience of dining in any Arabic restaurant in Shah Alam, and second, they should be residents of Shah Alam. Following the two-step approach provided by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Liu and Jang (2009), a Cronbach's Alpha was used to check the reliability of the instruments and a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) then used in order to verify the factor structure of a set of observed variables. After confirming the measurement model, Correlation Analysis was used to describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Then, Hierarchical Regression was used to measure the best predictor of the variables and to confirm the moderating effect of gender. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) edition 19.0 was used in this study to analyse the data.

4. Results

4.1. Demographic profile

The result of demographic profile indicate that the gender of respondents was differently distributed, representing 64.2% female and 35.8% male. The dominant age group of respondents is between 21-30 years old (37.5%), followed by 31-40 years old (30.2%), 20 years old and below (21.2%), and lastly 41-50 years old (11.2%) respectively. A majority of respondents work as government servants (33.3%), followed by private sectors (30.2), students (28.5%) and self-employed 8%. Only 2.7% of the respondents dined as frequent as more than 6 times per

month followed by 19% between 3 to 5 times a month, while the majority of the respondents dined between 1 to 2 times a month.

4.2. Relationship between service quality attributes and customer satisfaction

The Pearson Correlation results in Table 1 shows the correlation of each independent variable (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) is significant at 0.01 levels, two-tailed toward dependent variable (customer satisfaction). The result also indicated that there are positive relationships between all independent variables and customer satisfaction. The value between tangibles and customer satisfaction is 0.675, reliability is 0.660, responsiveness is 0.648, assurance is 0.689 and empathy is 0.682. There is no statistic significance difference among all variables. The strongest positive correlation with customer satisfaction is assurance ($r=0.689$) followed by empathy ($r=0.682$), tangibles (0.675) and reliability ($r=0.660$). The lowest variable that show positive relationship with customer satisfaction is responsiveness ($r=0.648$).

Table 1. The relationship between service quality attributes and customer satisfaction.

Attributes	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	n
Tangibles	.675**	.000	411
Reliability	.660**	.000	411
Responsiveness	.648**	.000	411
Assurance	.689**	.000	411
Empathy	.682**	.000	411

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3. Hierarchical multiple regression

Results indicated that only four attributes were significant which are tangibles (sig. value $< \alpha = 0.05$), assurance (sig. value $< \alpha = 0.05$), empathy (sig. value $< \alpha = 0.05$) and gender (sig. value $< \alpha = 0.05$). However, two attributes were found insignificant which are reliability (sig. value $= 0.380 > \alpha = 0.05$) and responsiveness (sig. value $= 0.445 > \alpha = 0.05$). Beta coefficient indicates which variables are important to the model by looking at the largest value derived. Prediction of customer satisfaction is explained in Table 2. The most significant predictor to the model is empathy ($\beta = .285, p < 0.01$), followed by tangibles ($\beta = .233, p < 0.01$), and assurance ($\beta = .199, p < 0.01$). However, reliability and responsiveness are omitted, ($\beta = .076, p < 0.05$ and $\beta = .030, p < 0.05$) respectively. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was then also used to assess the ability of a control measures (gender) to predict the level of satisfaction, after controlling for the influence of service quality. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Service quality was entered at Step 1, explaining 5.6% of the variance in customer satisfaction. After entry of the Gender at Step 2 the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 56.8%, $F(6,404) = 88.36, p < .001$. The control measure explained an additional 0.8% of the variance in customer satisfaction, after controlling for tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy, R squared change $= .008, F$ change $(1, 404) = 7.78, p < .001$. In the final model, control measure was statistically highly significant, with the gender recording beta value ($beta = -.093, p < .001$).

Table 2. Hierarchical multiple regression

Model	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
(Constant)	13.077	2.178			
Tangible	.552	.147	.233	3.753	.000
Reliability	.156	.151	.076	1.036	.301
Responsiveness	.063	.142	.030	.440	.660
Assurance	.449	.169	.199	2.665	.008
Empathy	.880	.181	.285	4.855	.000
Gender	-2.110	.757	-.093	-2.789	.006

(Note: $R^2 = .57, *p < .001$)

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this study will help the restaurant operators know the level of satisfaction rated by the

customers. This study also highlights the strength and weaknesses that the restaurant operators need to maintain and improve in their services offered. The results have also indicated that customers are satisfied with the Arabic restaurant's level of empathy, tangibles and assurance. Therefore, the restaurant operators need to make sure these three variables are well maintained and improved in order to increase customers' satisfaction. This study also found that the restaurant operators fail to satisfy their customers in terms of reliability and responsiveness. This shows that the restaurant operators need to give more attention on delivering consistent and dependable services, and provide accurate bills to the customers. Customers also demands that the employees must be good in problem solving, providing prompt and quick services, practising accurate guest check and delivering great services.

Consistent with past studies, the result also indicated that gender highly moderate the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction (Jin, Line & Goh 2013; Ma, Qu, & Eliwa, 2014; Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Ramanathan, Di, & Ramanathan, 2016). In line with previous studies, it was found that female customers show higher satisfaction level than male customers (Bryant, 1995; Ma, Qu, & Eliwa, 2014; Ma, Qu, & Njite, 2011). According to Iacobucci and Ostrom (1993) when assessing service encounter, male customers are more goal oriented compared to female customers who are more social oriented. Furthermore, male customer commonly has higher expectations on service quality (Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha, & Yun, 2007). This may be due to the fact that female customers have more communal concerns, a higher need for affiliation and fostering of harmonious relationships with others (Carlson, 1972). Due to these differences, female customers generally provide higher performance ratings (Argyle & Henderson, 1984) and they are more sensitive to relational aspects of a service encounter (Peter & Olson's, 1999). Hence, they paid greater attention to employees' services than male customers (Ma, Qu, & Eliwa, 2014). Thus, in the future, restaurant operators should give more efforts to improve the satisfaction level of male customers.

6.0 Conclusion

As a conclusion, this study has shown that all variables-tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy have significant relationships with customer satisfaction. It also indicated that gender moderates the relation between service quality and customer satisfaction. In addition, result also found female customers have higher level of satisfaction compare to male customers. Similarly, with all empirical studies, there are several limitations in this study. Firstly, it could not be generalized to the entire population of Malaysia because the study was conducted only in Shah Alam, Selangor. Hence, in future, it is suggested that the researcher focus on other big cities like Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Johor Baharu. Secondly, this study uses convenience sampling, in which it does not have specific respondents. Thus, in future studies, other sampling methods could be used to collect the data. Lastly, this study is focused on Arabic restaurants in general and the researcher did not have any specific requirements as to whether the restaurants are either from the higher-end or lower-end groups. Hence, in the future studies, it is suggested that there is a focus on restaurants in the higher-end category.

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